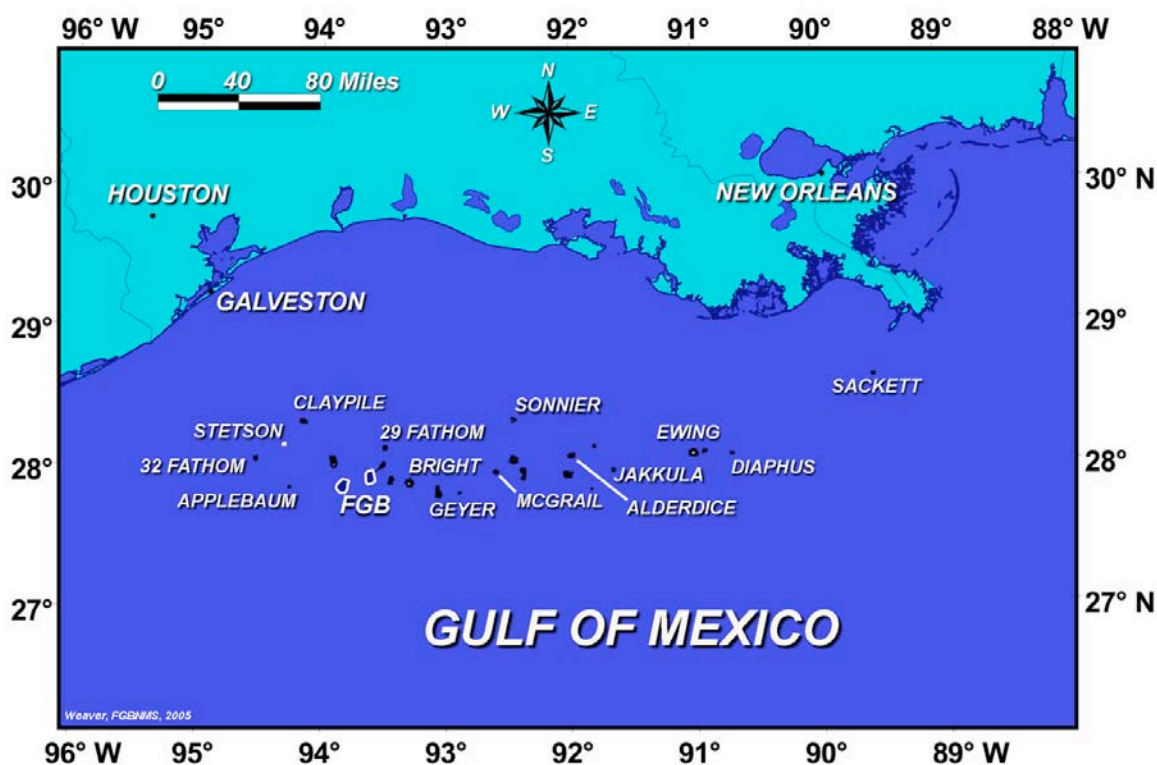




2008 CONDITION REPORT RELEASED



November 12, 2008--We are pleased to announce the release of the Condition Report 2008 for the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. Located in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico the sanctuary includes three separate areas, known as East Flower Garden, West Flower Garden and Stetson Banks. The banks support several of the most productive and unique habitats in the Gulf of Mexico, including the northernmost coral reefs in the continental United States. This report summarizes the conditions and trends for the sanctuary's water, habitat, and living resources.



“The report shows us that even though the sanctuary is 115 miles offshore, this special ocean place is connected to other habitats in the Gulf that are also vulnerable to human activities,” said G.P. Schmahl, sanctuary superintendent. “The report serves as a benchmark of the current health of the sanctuary that will help us develop effective ways to preserve and protect it for future generations to enjoy.”

Sanctuary in Good Condition but Emerging Threats Recognized

Living Resources Status & Trends

#	Issue	Rating	Basis for Judgment	Description of Findings
9	Biodiversity	—	Long-term monitoring of coral reef communities and other information collected since the 1970s.	Biodiversity appears to reflect pristine or near-pristine conditions and promotes ecosystem integrity (full community development and function).
10	Extracted Species	?	Unpublished observations suggest a decline in certain species of fish, e.g. grouper and jacks.	Extraction may inhibit full community development and function and may cause measurable but not severe degradation of ecosystem integrity.
11	Non-Indigenous Species	—	Recent invasive species have been discovered, but abundances are low and there is no evidence that they have become established in natural areas.	Non-indigenous species exist, precluding full community development and function, but are unlikely to cause substantial or persistent degradation of ecosystem integrity.
12	Key Species Status	?	Coral, mantas and sea turtles appear to be stable. Hammerhead, grouper, snapper, and jacks may be declining. Diadema sea urchin populations remain depressed since the 1983-84 die-off.	Selected key or keystone species are at reduced levels, perhaps precluding full community development and function, but substantial or persistent declines are not expected.
13	Key Species Condition	▼	Observations of coral disease for four straight years, though no apparent population impact to date; loss of some <i>Millepora alpicornis</i> due to bleaching.	The condition of selected key resources is not optimal, perhaps precluding full ecological function, but substantial or persistent declines are not expected.
14	Human Activities	?	Stable levels of recreational diving, apparent increase and effectiveness of private and commercial fishing; no monitoring of use levels is in place.	Selected activities have resulted in measurable living resource impacts, but evidence suggests effects are localized, not widespread.

Status: Good Good/Fair Fair Fair/Poor Poor Undet.

Trends: Improving (▲), Not Changing (—), Getting Worse (▼), Undetermined Trend (?), Question not applicable (N/A)

Water Quality Status & Trends

#	Issue	Rating	Basis for Judgment	Description of Findings
1	Stressors	▼	Isolated contaminants; freshwater influxes from terrestrial sources; increased water temperature.	Selected conditions may preclude full development of living resource assemblages and habitats, but are not likely to cause substantial or persistent declines.
2	Eutrophic Condition	—	No evidence based on ongoing monitoring since the late 1980s.	Conditions do not appear to have the potential to negatively affect living resources or habitat quality.
3	Human Health	▼	Recent outbreaks of ciguatera traced to fish from the Flower Gardens; large proportion of fish tested for mercury exceeded levels for safe consumption.	Selected conditions have caused or are likely to cause severe impacts, but cases to date have not suggested a pervasive problem.
4	Human Activities	—	Vessel discharges, oil and gas platform and pipeline discharges.	Some potentially harmful activities exist, but they do not appear to have had a negative effect on water quality.

Status: Good Good/Fair Fair Fair/Poor Poor Undet.

Trends: Improving (▲), Not Changing (—), Getting Worse (▼), Undetermined Trend (?), Question not applicable (N/A)

In general, the health of most Flower Garden Banks sanctuary resources is rated as either “good” or “good/fair.” One current concern is the recent findings of high levels of several contaminants found in fish in and around the sanctuary. This has caused the Food and Drug Administration to issue a seafood advisory to seafood processors about fish caught around the sanctuary.

Also of particular concern is the decreased abundance of certain fished species, including grouper, jacks, and snapper, which are dominant predators in the ecosystem. The report points to the need for continued research on how the removal of predatory fish species can affect the rest of the ecosystem.

Report Provides Baseline

The first report of this kind about the Flower Garden Banks NMS provides a baseline for monitoring changes to sanctuary resources and identifying research and management priorities. It also helps set the stage for the development of a comprehensive draft management plan for the sanctuary.

Habitat Status & Trends

#	Issue	Rating	Basis for Judgment	Description of Findings
5	Abundance/ Distribution	—	Major habitat types appear to be stable, although additional monitoring in deeper communities is warranted.	Habitats are in pristine or near-pristine condition and are unlikely to preclude full community development.
6	Structure	—	Damage by anchoring, lost or discarded fishing gear and cables, mostly in deep habitats; destabilization by fishing gear and/or anchors at Stetson Bank.	Selected habitat loss or alteration has taken place, precluding full development of living resources, but it is unlikely to cause substantial or persistent degradation in living resources or water quality.
7	Contaminants	?	Limited investigations suggest low levels of contaminants.	Contaminants do not appear to have the potential to negatively affect living resources or water quality.
8	Human Activities	—	Limited number of dive charters, some fishing gear impacts, some illegal fishing.	Some potentially harmful activities exist, but they do not appear to have had a negative effect on habitat quality.

Status: Good Good/Fair Fair Fair/Poor Poor Undet.

Trends: Improving (▲), Not Changing (—), Getting Worse (▼), Undetermined Trend (?), Question not applicable (N/A)

Similar reports are being developed for the other sites in the National Marine Sanctuary System. Condition Reports for Flower Garden Banks, Olympic Coast, Gray's Reef, Monitor, Stellwagen Bank, and Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuaries can be viewed or downloaded at: <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/condition/>

The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Condition Report 2008 can also be downloaded directly from the sanctuary web site at http://flowergarden.noaa.gov/document_library/science/sci_documents.html